SECOND EDITION

Improving Schools Through Action Research

A Comprehensive Guide for Educators

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concerned with the transferability of her results to other students. That may be a concern after her initial research cycle—particularly if other teachers become interested in her use of rubrics and wish to try the intervention in their classrooms—but is not a present, pressing issue. Instead she may wish to focus on democratic validity, because involving students in the rubric planning and giving them a voice is aligned with her values. She also may decide she needs to reduce her bias and be open to other interpretations of results (thus increasing neutrality and dialogic validity) to ensure accuracy and increase understanding. She might further wish to understand the ways setting and context impact results (e.g., Does creating/using rubrics work better with some students? If so, which students most benefit? How might the activity be changed to better work with other students?), and would therefore be concerned with process validity.

Once you have determined which validity conditions are necessary for your study, the next step is to choose specific methods for increasing validity. Strategies for increasing the different forms of validity are described here. In Table 6.2, these strategies are graphically aligned with the various forms of validity described in this section.

Steps for increasing validity:

- **Utilize peer debriefing** (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing involves discussing your study with a colleague, peer, or critical friend who is not invested in the study (not a collaborator). During the debriefing session, you discuss with your peer your interpretations of collected data. The peer debriefer can provide alternative interpretations, help point out your biases and the way your values may be coloring your interpretations, and assist you in formulating new directions for ongoing study.
- **Engage in persistent and prolonged observations** (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The longer you are able to collect data, the more likely you are to see the true effects of your intervention. Prolonged observation will help you determine whether the intervention is effective after the newness of it wears off. Persistent observation will allow you to gather enough data to add to the credibility of your study and help answer the *why* questions.
- **Be sure to record data accurately** (Maxwell, 1992; Wolcott, 1994). Accurate recording during your action research study is critical. You must plan for ways to record as much information as possible when important events occur. Also, sufficient detail should be included in observational records, field notes, and notes from interviews. It can be very helpful to record parts of your study, using either audio- or videotape, so you can revisit events and conversations and record them accurately.
- **Use member checks** (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Also known as *respondent validation* (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995), member checks are a useful way to reduce bias and increase credibility in your study. Member checks involve discussing your interpretations of data with the participants of your study. This allows you to determine whether your findings accurately represent participants' actions and responses.
- **Triangulate data sources** (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994; Eisner, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As described in Chapter 5, collecting multiple sources of data is a necessary step in action research. When the researcher uses multiple sources to corroborate findings (for example, *teachers' self-reports* indicated that they implemented a new policy for ensuring discipline procedures consistently for all students,

Table 6.2 Strategies for Increasing Validity

Type of Validity	Focus	Strategies
• Truth-value validity • Process validity	Accuracy of facts and findings; correct interpretations made and correct conclusions reached	• Persistent and prolonged observation • Triangulation • Accurate data recording • Member checks • Peer debriefing • Negative case analysis • Biases made clear
• Outcome validity • Catalytic validity	Ability of study to increase understanding, resolve problems, and transform practices	• Presentation of results • Continuous, ongoing reflective planning
• Applicability/transferability • Consistency/dependability	Usefulness of the results in different settings and contexts and with different individuals	• Thick description of setting, study, and participants • Ongoing investigation with different participants
• Neutrality/confirmability	Evidence that results are accurate and are not a result of researcher bias	• Peer debriefing • Accurate data recording • Member checks • Triangulation • Biases made clear • Audit trail
• Democratic validity	Evidence that stakeholders collaborated and/or were given a voice in the research process	• Peer debriefing • Member checks • Audit trail
• Dialogic validity	Sharing or disseminating research findings, seeking feedback about the accuracy of interpretations and conclusions	• Peer debriefing • Member checks • Presentation of results

percentages of discipline referrals for each ethnic group were similar, and *conferences* with teachers at each grade level revealed that teachers believed the new discipline policy was fair and necessary and they were committed to following it), the credibility of the findings is increased.

- **Provide thick description of the setting and study** (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Providing thick description means describing in detail the setting, participants, intervention, and research methods employed in the study (completed in Chapter 4 activities). Portraying the setting and study in this way provides an audience or readers with the information needed to determine whether the study is generalizable, transferable, or useful in their settings. When the research setting shares characteristics with the audiences' or readers' setting, generalizability is increased.

- **Employ techniques in negative case analysis** (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Negative case analysis involves qualifying research findings by analyzing data that are not supported or corroborated by other sources of data. Data that do not "agree" with the majority of the other data collected are considered the negative case. In the example just cited about the new discipline program aimed at ensuring equitable treatment of students in different racial groups, the three sources of evidence—teachers' self-reports, percentages of discipline referrals, and conferences with teachers—corroborated the finding that the new policy was in place and working effectively. If, however, there was a negative case, such as an area in which the policy did not seem to be working well, the case would need to be analyzed to determine why the policy wasn't working. Then the results could be refined to explain that, overall, the policy was effective, but under certain conditions (which would be described) the policy was less effective.
- **Make clear any researcher bias** (Merriam, 1998). It is important as you plan your study that you consider any biases you have at the outset. Engaging in reflection at the beginning of the research process is one way to clarify any initial biases. Bias here is defined as any preconceived ideas about the participants, setting, intervention, or the research process itself. Although the word "bias" has many negative connotations, in the case of research you can be biased if you believe with certainty that your intervention will be successful. As you prepare to begin the intervention phase of your study, consider any preconceived ideas you have and note them in your journal. Referring to these biases as you collect and analyze data will help keep biases in check. In addition, include information on biases—and how you dealt with them—in the research report.
- **Make available an audit trail** (Halpern, 1983; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An audit trail is simply a record of data analyzed in the study. This may include analyzed artifacts, video- or audiotape, transcribed notes from observations or interviews, fieldnotes, records of ways data were analyzed and interpreted, the timeline of the study, and the researcher's journal. When the audit trail is made available, it is possible for the audience and/or stakeholders to look at both the researcher's results and the actual data to see if results and interpretations are accurate. Making audit trails available is particularly important in larger studies that involve policy, program, or curricular decisions.
- **Present results to key audiences** (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994, 2007). Anderson et al. suggest engaging in dialogue with peers as a way to increase dialogic validity. In sharing results with others, peers are able to review each others' work and provide feedback on the soundness of both the research process and the researcher's conclusions. Key audiences can include colleagues as well as stakeholders in the process (e.g., parents, students, teachers, administrators).
- **Engage in continuous, ongoing reflective planning.** In the process of action research, a researcher continually reflects on what is occurring during the study and makes changes to the research plan as necessary. For example, a principal engaged in project on teacher study groups may determine to alter the intervention plan if sources of data indicate that changes are warranted. If the principal's observations lead her to believe the groups need more than one week to prepare for their study group meetings, she would be wise to alter the intervention plan to allow for a longer period of preparation time between meetings. Ongoing reflective planning also allows a researcher to change data collection strategies based on experiences during the data collection phase. If the principal investigating study groups determines that